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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA POLITICAL UPDATE: GSL LOOKING FOR
MAJORITY AMID ATTACKS IN PARLIAMENT AND TENSIONS IN THE EAST

REF: COLOMBO 1062 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reason 1.5
(b,d).

1. (C) This update reviews the following political
developments in Sri Lanka:

-- The government remains in pursuit of an elusive majority
in Parliament

-- Continued reports of tension and violence in the east

-- The UNP increases the volume of verbal attacks against the
government

-- The saga continues over the JHU Buddhist monk abused by
government MPs in Parliament.

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GSL at work on gaining a Majority

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2. (C) Two and half months after the parliamentary elections
that brought President Chandrika Kumaratunga,s United
People,s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) party to power, the
government has been unable to gain a majority (113 seats) in
the 225-member Parliament. (Currently, the GSL can claim the
support of 107 MPs.) Over the course of several weeks, local
media has reported that senior GSL officials have been in
discussions with members of various parties, including the
Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and Sri Lankan Muslim Congress
(SLMC), to join the government. To date, only one SLMC MP
has &crossed over,8 despite stories that multiple deals
were imminent. With Parliament meeting only three times
since the formation of the UPFA government, 114 MPs from
non-government parties accused the government June 21 of
obstructing the legislative body from meeting and conducting
business because it does not have a majority.

3. (C) COMMENT: The GSL,s inability to fashion a majority
in Parliament is quickly becoming a serious liability for the
President and her party. Initial public efforts by
government officials regarding constitutional and electoral
reforms in the weeks immediately following the April 2
election have been largely overshadowed by the GSL,s
fixation on obtaining the majority in Parliament. The
continuing parliamentary situation also weakens the
government's position regarding peace negotiations with the
LTTE. The longer the government remains unable to make
progress on any substantive work in Parliament, the less the
Tigers will believe in the government's ability to get the
Sinhalese in the south to agree to an interim administration
for the north/east, as the peace process continues. The
President, according to her office, returns from London the
evening of June 24 and presumably will turn her attention to
further parliamentary horse-trading. END COMMENT.

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Tension still high in the East

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4. (C) Several recent media reports have focused on the
continuing tension in the east between the Liberation Tigers
of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and cadre who remain loyal to the
breakaway eastern rebel leader Karuna. Although the LTTE has
denied reports of fighting in the area, the group maintains
its belief that the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) is using Karuna and
his faction to target the LTTE. In a June 19 press
conference, LTTE Batticaloa-Ampara Special Commander Ramesh
warned the government not to use the Karuna faction to
declare war against the LTTE. A prominent English weekly
quoted him, "Serious repercussions could flow if this
situation continues. We have information to confirm
Karuna... is being harbored by the Army. We also know his
group is collecting information about us."

5. (C) During a June 14-15 visit by the DCM to the Ampara
and Batticaloa areas in the East, military, police and SLMM
interlocutors emphasized that Karuna elements, although
driven into small groups since the April military defeat by
Prabhakaran forces, were active and moving at will. Small

skirmishes between the two LTTE groups, largely in the "uncleared areas" were commonplace. Government security forces were in touch with both LTTE factions and working hard to prevent the LTTE internal struggle from spilling over into violence which would affect the larger populace. To that end, GSL security was tight, especially in Batticaloa (with armed patrols on the streets, largely ignored by residents going about their business) and in smaller towns north of Batticaloa towards the area where the April fighting took place (for example, several armored personnel carriers with troops were patrolling the main road through Eravur, north of Batticaloa). The police had recently discovered and arrested several Prabhakaran "pistol gangs" trying to move into Batticaloa and other towns to settle scores with Karuna elements. Indeed, a police special task force (STF) officer near Ampara told DCM that in many of the small towns under his purview, the LTTE offices are empty since the new cadres assigned to take over by LTTE headquarters are reluctant to take up their duties for fear of being knocked off by Karuna elements. "They turn on the lights and then go home." The general consensus was that Karuna is the strong preference of Tamils in the East, but that, drawing from historical experience, the population will adapt to whichever side prevails. Given the security tensions, it was quite striking the extent to which life was proceeding as normal. The DCM and party had no difficulties in moving about to various AID/OTI project opening ceremonies, all of which drew sizeable, happy crowds.

16. (C) COMMENT: Tension and unrest have simmered in the east since the March break by Karuna, with continual gossip about the rebel leader's true whereabouts and his presumed involvement with the Sri Lankan Army. These latest news reports seem to indicate a sterner LTTE warning to the government about aiding attacks in the east. See Septel on latest developments regarding Karuna's status and whereabouts. END COMMENT.

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Opposition at work on attacking GSL
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17. (C) Members of the main opposition United National Party (UNP) continue to attack the new UPFA government. On June 16, G.L. Peiris, UNP spokesman and chief peace negotiator under the former government, claimed that the President was a bundle of confusion and solely concerned with obtaining a majority in Parliament. He stated that the LTTE appeared to be losing confidence in the peace process, as a result of contradictions in the President's recent statements to Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs and her speech to the nation regarding the role of the Tiger's interim administration proposal in the peace talks. (These comments are the latest in Peiris, continual criticism of the GSL's peace process, which he has characterized as a sham.) Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader, Rauf Hakeem, also criticized the changes in the President's position on the peace talks, stating she was only interested in power.

18. (C) Separately, two former UNP ministers have criticized the new government's economic efforts. Former Commerce and Consumer Affairs Minister Ravi Karunanayake (himself the subject of a corruption-related arrest warrant) sent a public letter to Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) deputy minister Sunil Handunetti declaring that election campaign promises to address rising food prices and other economic issues had remained unfulfilled. In another public letter, Karu Jayasuriya, the former Power and Energy Minister, refuted allegations that no power generation projects had been initiated during his tenure as minister.

19. (C) COMMENT: Although these various attacks are directed to individuals, they seem to be part of an orchestrated effort by the UNP to criticize the President and her minority government. The UNP is taking its turn at criticizing the government, as President Kumaratunga and her Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) did during their past two years in the opposition. Although the President has recently emphasized that the SLFP and the UNP combined have a majority of the seats in Parliament, it is clear that both sides would have to overcome many obstacles, first among them enmity between the President and former PM Wickremesinghe, to work together. As for the UNP, its recent behavior does not foretell a strong showing by the party in the July 10 Provincial council elections. END COMMENT.

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Brawl with Buddhist monks in Parliament
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10. (C) The sad affair of the Buddhist monk MP from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party who was physically abused in Parliament on June 8 continues. JHU party members, annoyed by two of the nine JHU MPs who voted with the government in the April 22 speaker election, took steps to replace one of the offending MPs. When the Ven. Akmeemana Dayaratana Thero was scheduled to swear in as a new JHU MP during the June 8

Parliament session, UPFA MPs physically tried to prevent the swearing-in. Two JHU Buddhist monk MPs were injured, & in a planned attack,⁸ according to Ven. Omalpe Sobitha Thero, another JHU MP who witnessed the brawl. Government MPs have denied attacking the monk, even as one of the monks remains hospitalized with bruises. Mervyn Silva, a UPFA MP, allegedly declared he would commit suicide if found complicit in the incident.

11. (C) COMMENT: Most political interlocutors are certain that the monks were manhandled by UPFA MPs and, across the political spectrum, many are shocked by the recent events in Parliament. Although the government seems desperate to obtain a majority in Parliament and to prevent the loss of the GSL-sympathetic monk who was being replaced, the MPs, actions have likely only served to further alienate the JHU MPs. END COMMENT.

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